

CIA/RR CB 64-67 October 1964

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INTELLIGENCE BRIEF

COMMUNIST CHINA: APPARENT BUILDUP OF RESERVES OF NATURAL RUBBER

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE Office of Research and Reports

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COMMUNIST CHINA: APPARENT BUILDUP OF RESERVES OF NATURAL RUBBER

Communist China seems to be acquiring a record amount of natural rubber in 1964. Purchases during the first 7 months were at a pace unparalleled since the days of the "great leap forward," amounting to 94,200 tons, or 73 percent more than during the same period in 1963.

China's increased purchases of natural rubber may be a political as well as an economic gesture of support for Indonesia, which has experienced difficulties in disposing of its natural rubber since it cut off trade with Malaysia in September 1963. (Malaysia formerly provided a market for roughly 60 percent of Indonesian exports of rubber.) It also appears that the Chinese are interested in building up their reserves of natural rubber.

Chinese Imports of Rubber

Communist China produces very little rubber and relies on imports for virtually all of its needs. In the absence of any firm data on use patterns and requirements for rubber, China's imports of this commodity (consisting largely of natural rubber) are regarded as a rough measure of its consumption.* The following tabulation shows China's imports of natural rubber for the years 1949-50 and 1957-63 and for the first 7 months of 1964. 1/

Year	Quantity (Metric Tons)
1949 1950	27,900 71,100
1957 1958 1959 1960 1961 1962 1963	57,700 98,800 110,500 121,700 84,600 108,700 109,200
1964 (Jan-Jul)	94,200

^{*} Communist China imports synthetic rubber and exports natural rubber at what are believed to be roughly offsetting levels. In 1960, for example, China's total imports of synthetic rubber were estimated at 21,600 tons and its exports of natural rubber at 17,900 tons.

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The foregoing data show a sharp rise in purchases of natural rubber by China during the Korean conflict in 1950 and again in the period 1958 through 1960, when China was engaged in its "great leap forward." After a marked decline in 1961, imports of rubber rose and held at a level of about 109,000 tons in 1962 and 1963. Total imports of rubber in 1963, however, would have been much lower had it not been for a sudden increase in imports of rubber during the final quarter of the year. Such imports continued at a near-record pace in the first 7 months of 1964, amounting to 94,200 tons, or 73 percent more than in the same period of 1963. 2/

2. Possible Reasons for Increased Imports

Although no precise motive can be assigned for China's increased purchases of natural rubber, there are several possible explanations. One strong possibility is that Peiping stepped up its buying as a political as well as an economic gesture of support for Indonesia, which, since it cut off trade with Malaysia in September 1963, has experienced difficulty in marketing a large quantity of its rubber. It is worth noting that China's buying splurge began about this same time and, moreover, has been concentrated in Indonesia. In an apparently related development, China has cut its purchases of rubber from Malaysia from about 9, 200 tons in 1963 to only 91 tons in the first 7 months of 1964. Through its increased purchases from Indonesia, China is absorbing about one-fifth of the surplus created by Indonesia's loss of the Malaysian market.

China's increased buying also may be motivated by a desire to build up its stockpiles of natural rubber. The need to "guard against unforeseen changes" by maintaining stocks of "indispensable reserves," presumably including rubber, was stressed recently by an official of China's Ministry of Finance. 3/ Inasmuch as reports on China's rubber fabrication industry do not indicate any significant expansion in the consumption of rubber and inasmuch as exports of rubber by China are small, it appears that China is accumulating a fairly large surplus of natural rubber. Should imports continue to exceed requirements at about the same level for the remainder of this year, it is estimated that China will have about 50,000 tons of rubber for stockpiling -- roughly half of its estimated annual requirement.

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Sources:

- 1. Rubbér Statistical Bulletin, Table 4, Mar 51. U. Ibid., Table 5, Aug 64. U.
- 2. State, London. Airgram A-839, 7 Oct 64. U.
- 3. Ta Kung Pao, 14 Aug 64, p. 3. U.

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- 3. Ta Kung Pao, 14 Aug 64, p. 3. V. 548 off 485.

